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A Theory of the Sociology of Women

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Introduction

Feminist theories present a number of options for organizing a model of inequality for women. At times, these present mutually exclusive concepts or definitions, or even causal factors. Patriarchal theories will not be used because they do not perceive women's oppression. Without an assumption of sex stratification and oppression, women's reality cannot be accurately described. Along with these patriarchal models, sex role socialization theories have been criticized for having (1) an emphasis on finding a singular universal truth and verification method, (2) a commitment to objectivity and observer neutrality, (3) dichotomous classification and primarily causal models, (4) ahistorical views, and (5) nonreflexive use of language as a medium for transmitting thoughts, concepts, and theories. Both patriarchal and sex role models ignore the dependence of discourse on "particular positions established by particular modes of language." (Pateman and Gross, 1986: 200). For example, sex role analyses use bipolar concepts, such as masculinity and femininity as givens. Even models of androgyny anticipate the reality of a continuum with fixed masculine and feminine end points. Thus, the language used in creating patriarchal and sex role theories sets parameters that cannot be ignored or transformed by the models themselves.

Feminist Theory and Sociological Theory

A genuinely feminist approach to theory draws on concepts and analytic tools that are appropriate to the questions of women's experience of inequality. First, we can begin from an understanding of our own conditions (a sociology by women). This understanding need not depend on the concepts or definitions set by other researchers. We can develop models that use nonsexist concepts and language, and move away from rigid either-or dichotomies. Instead of assuming a gulf or space between rational concepts, or between the subject (researcher) and object (women respondents), feminist theorists acknowledge the continuity between them (a sociology about women). This new assumption reduces that bipolarity. Finally, the products and consequences of our thinking can be assessed against the probability of change for women (a sociology for women).

The reasons for such a feminist approach to theory allow us to:

- a. Look at the possibility of an integration,
- b. Account for historical fluctuation, and
- c. Develop models that are testable and challengeable through the use of feminist methodologies and praxis.

One caution for developing an integrative theory is that we not simply accept eclectic concepts and approaches. Instead, we should draw together conceptual pieces into a web of ideas that transcend patriarchal theory building. But we must

also struggle with use of traditional sociological theory building tools—including the language of theory building and the hierarchy of these constructs and propositions.

Why Build a Feminist Sociological Theory?

It is clear that earlier patriarchal and liberal feminist theories are inadequate to explain the development, maintenance, and change of women's oppression in the range of cultures we can use as examples (Chafetz, 1988). The reasons for building a feminist theory or explanation are clear. But why build a sociological theory? Are the problems created by patriarchal theory and liberal feminist theory inherent to the sociological theory building process? We believe it is not. Theory as a practice can itself be examined from a feminist perspective, analyzed for potential consequences, and revisioned for its potential contributions to an understanding of women's lives.

Theory "seeks to explain why phenomena exist and why they reveal certain *processes and properties*" (Turner and Beeghley, 1981: 2). If, then, theory building can be used to illuminate, not only products, outcomes, properties, and classification schemes, but also process, then theory retains utility for feminist purposes. Our purpose is to explain some dimensions of the question: Why inequality? What are its origins and consequences? How is it maintained? These are basic questions outlined by Janet Chafetz in *Feminist Sociology* (1988).

To Weber, any systematic approach to theory building also involves *verstehen* (translated by some into English as *understanding*). Weber outlined two different types of *verstehen*: "the first is the direct, observational understanding of the subjective meaning of a given act" (Weber, 1968: 8). This type of *verstehen* does not necessarily include extensive knowledge of the broader social context. The second type of *verstehen* involves explanatory understanding, where the researcher supplies an understanding in terms of motive or social context. Some theorists imply that the second type of *verstehen* is a "rational" understanding of motivation that places the act in a more intelligible and more inclusive context of social meaning (Weber, 1968: 8-10; for further details, see Turner and Beeghley, 1981: 215-220).

To most feminists outside the liberal feminist model, "It is here that the problem of explanatory understanding arises" (Smith, 1987: 120). The very process of observation builds a "one-sided" relationship between the knower and the known. The researcher (subject) has the power to impose a potentially biased framework over the respondent's own interpretation. This is not merely an intellectual power, but an institutional power—access to books, media, and the role of "expert" on women's lives.

Dorothy Smith argues that we must begin any inquiry into women's lives from the standpoint of women (1987: 127). This requires beginning from the standpoint of the known—by asking women to talk about their everyday lives and local practices. Feminist researchers should seek methods that preserve the standpoint of the women researched. This should include, not only the definition of concepts, but also the construction of research questions, the development of research instruments, and the drawing of conclusions. Smith suggests that we move from particular experiences, and then embed these experiences in the social organization of institutions: school, family, church, etc.

Building Propositions in a Sociology of Women

We can use the example of Shulamith Firestone's work on reproduction and inequality (1970). To Firestone, key concepts in women's oppression were reproduction, how it is both biologically and technologically defined, and the concept of oppression, including economic, sexual, and familial inequality. The control of reproduction by women through technology would lead to reduced inequality. Thus, her propositional basis is an effort to build a theory describing how women's inequality is maintained and can be changed.

Let us use the example of Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* as a set of theoretical propositions. She proposes that an increase in reproductive technology might be associated with an increase in women's paid labor force participation and economic independence. Some historians use the advent of modern birth control and the rise of women's paid labor force participation, and subsequent legal rights, as observational indicators of such a theory. Indicators of modern birth control include both the invention of rubber at the turn of the century and the development of chemical birth control pills that regulate hormonal levels and estrus cycles for women. Historians might then point to increased wage labor by women and parallel changes in civil rights for women workers as empirical verifications for Firestone's model. Clearly, other factors might be important, and could be brought into the model, based on one's own feminist perspective. What other factors might affect the relationships among reproductive technology, economic independence, and legal rights for women?

A Theory for the Sociology of Women

A major challenge for feminist theorists is to bridge the structural and interpretive approaches available in the social sciences and in women's studies theory. An integrative theory of women's oppression should draw from all available models, not to construct a hodgepodge, but with an eye toward the patchwork quilt of women's traditional crafts. Such a patchwork would take the useful concepts of feminist models and draw them together to make a strong theoretical fabric.

In general terms, we might draw on structural approaches that contribute generalizable concepts and an "anticipated social structure." These generalizable concepts should not determine ahead of time the questions we ask of women or the answers we hear from them. Instead, these provide frameworks for anticipating those social structures and organizations that might influence women's lives. Interpretive approaches then can contribute meaning and process at the individual level (Smith, 1987).

In this next section, we outline how the concept of value can be used to frame women's experiences of oppression from a formal perspective. The poststructuralists argue that we cannot answer the question, "Are there women?" (DeBeauvoir, 1974; Eisenstein and Jardine, 1980). We believe that the questions must be asked, even if the medium of language will ultimately distort the reality of those lives.

A. Women and Value: Axioms for a Sociology of Women

The central concept for our model of women's oppression is the notion of value as outlined by Benston (1969). Benston develops an initial concept of value that sets out two ideal types: use value and exchange value. She argues that all socially significant activity has use value—that is, it is useful to the individual actor or to

others in some way. The other type of value is exchange value—which takes on meaning only when in a market context. Both of these concepts have variability—so, for example, the usefulness of a particular activity can vary in time, or depending upon the audience or even the individual actor.

Variability in use value is essentially subjective, and implies the first type of *verstehen* described by Weber: the subjective meaning of social action. The concept of exchange value has primary reference to the market, with information that can be gathered with both types of *verstehen*: (1) the rational relation of exchange within the market that can be verified to some extent independently of the respondent (i.e., what would this product or labor be worth if one sold it today?), and (2) the subjective meaning of the market to the individual (is it important what the market sets as the exchange value, or to what extent is the individual woman aware of the exchange value and acting with that in mind?).

Benston argues from a materialist position that exchange value is determined within the confines of a capitalist system by the need for profit (capital) and the conflicting interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. The workers seek to earn a living wage and to increase that wage as much as possible. Owners seek to increase their profits, and, indeed, need to maintain profits in order to compete effectively in the marketplace. The notion of use value and exchange value takes on special meaning for women's unpaid, but useful, contributions in reproduction, child care, household labor, and emotional roles within a family context.

We take the concept of value at a more abstract level than did Benston, using it as an axiom. Thus, we are using the concept in its societal market-nonmarket context, but we include the definition of symbolic value that is constructed by the individual in a social context.

At its more general level, a value is defined as something that has meaning to the individual. It can have positive or negative connotations, but our focus is on the greater or lesser meaning of material or nonmaterial aspects of culture.

In most societies, important symbols of value are made available through language or nonverbal communication. Most of the important symbols are known within a given society, although access to control over those symbols (access to speaking, writing, or reading the symbols) may be restricted for certain groups or individuals. Some symbols are selected by an individual or group as an important basis for behavior or for constructing self-images.

An example of this might be the extent to which a certain visual presentation of the body is valued. This could involve clothing, coloring of the body (including cosmetic use), or even body size and shape. We can then observe the extent to which an individual or group in the society has the ability to control the definition of value (what makes a positively or negatively valued body type) and who has the resources to acquire that body type. In particular, we are interested in the patterns of institutionalized access to these resources and gender differences, in this case in the valuing and control of body types.

A value can be exhibited consciously or unconsciously by the individual or group. For example, changes in the valued body type may not be immediately brought to the attention of all members of the society, but may be a result of gradual change. However, we can infer some of these changes from the actions or perceptions of groups and individuals.

Societal value is more obviously set by a market economy where the process or

product is assumed to be strictly evaluated by its exchange potential. However, exchange or economic value is influenced, not only by supply and demand, but also by cultural norms and beliefs. Therefore, economic rewards will be determined also by those who have power. The more generalizable question, then, becomes, who has the power to control definitions of value? Using our example of body image, there are economic rewards associated with the valued body type. There are certain prices paid at market values for certain body types of models in advertising. Women may seek and maintain a valued body type; however, only certain ones receive exchange value. Here use value and exchange value are integrated and the powerful are those who determine when exchange value will be allocated.

B. Propositions for a Sociology of Women

We next identify the relationships among important concepts in our model. What is the relationship of use value to exchange value in a given society? How does this relationship affect women in varying institutions, such as the economy or the family? What is the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism in the construction of societal values? Given these relationships, what specific hypotheses might we generate about women's material and nonmaterial lives?

The first proposition for our model is that in a capitalistic market economy, exchange value takes priority over use value. We anticipate that, if an activity has some relationship to market activity, the market value will influence its symbolic value in other dimensions as well.

Drawing on the radical feminist theories, we also propose that, in a patriarchal system, men set the exchange value. As Hartmann and others have pointed out, capitalism goes hand in hand with patriarchy in most Western industrial nations (Hartmann, 1984). In the economic structure, men are able to control the definition of exchange value because they control profits, but also because they control the bureaucratic administration of labor.

Feminist theorists have argued persuasively that even the cultural notion of "female" is defined by men. DeBeauvoir (1974) stated that men set the parameters for what is valued, and women are defined as "other," which contributes to their devaluation. In a market sense, much of what women "do" has been defined as "useful" by men, but the market value for this work has been set very low. We anticipate that, when men "do" what women "do," these activities are more highly valued. In addition, when men have control of what women do, that behavior may take on (but need not necessarily take on) some type of exchange value.

In a patriarchal system, men also control the use of symbols, especially in the public sphere. The exchange value set by men is reinforced in individual and group interaction through language and symbolic cues (Pearson, 1985).

In the next section, we illuminate the relationships of use value and exchange value in capitalist market systems and patriarchal systems in three areas: economics, sexuality, and self-esteem.

1. Economics and Value

We begin with an explanation of the classic Marxian model of economics as presented by Margaret Benston (1969). This model is expanded to show the

interconnection of use value and exchange value in a patriarchal structure as well. The economic contributions of women are dichotomized by Benston into those which are associated with use value and exchange value. The contribution of feminist theory has been the recognition that, throughout any economic history, women have contributed in both types of labor, but patriarchal theories and methodologies have omitted information about the latter.

Christine Bose (1987: 268) tracks the public accounting of labor through the history of census data omissions. Because the census defined work as "one's usual task," most married women's occupation was defined as housewife, even if they were temporarily working for pay. Home-based work was not officially recorded until 1940. Prior to that time, a significant number of women were taking in factory piece work, or taking boarders into the home. A national study of urban workers in 1892 found that 27 percent of all married women took in boarders, from whom they earned about 43 percent as much as their spouses' income (Jensen, 1980, as quoted in Bose, 1987).

In constructing the public discourse on exchange value, the focus of the media and of political discussion has been on white middle-class occupations and labor. Although the census did record the occupations of slaves, no complete record of their roles has been preserved. Thus, the lives of black women prior to the Emancipation Proclamation have been limited to a few diaries and to public records that define blacks as property. Immigrant and black women's work was not recorded separately by race from white women until the 1890's, and various Hispanic groups have been tabulated as white at various points in time. Not until the 1980 census were significant Hispanic cultural groups separated such as Cubana, Chicana, and Puerta Ricana for research and policy discussion.

Additionally, the focus of white academic feminists initially was on the higher-status occupations (Seifert, 1976). Only recently have we had the inclusion of working class women's lives and contributions in perspectives that take into account the effects of international market economies, the economic depressions in the industrial northeast, and the meaning of layoffs and unemployment for women in blue-collar occupations (Rosen, 1987).

2. *Sexuality*

In the definition and everyday experience of sexuality, we should consider two frames of reference. The first frame is in the context of the family, as this is the major institution in which sexual behaviors, attitudes, and norms are structured. Women in the family, as children or as wives, exchange sexual fidelity for economic and social support or protection (Brownmiller, 1975). Women without this male protection are described in feminist literature as "open territory victims"—women who deserve their victimization because they were not protected by men (indicating that they were in some way unwilling to enter into this exchange).

This sexual exchange is recognized in state laws regarding parental rights and marital responsibilities. In many states, the husband in a marriage is required to provide economic support for the family, and the wife is required to provide domestic services (Weitzman, 1981). Rights and obligations for sexual access are outlined without references to gender, but the absence of marital rape laws in the majority of states identifies the informal and formal definitions of sexual control for men.

As Rubin points out, the barter of wives and daughters is a primarily economic activity which takes on sexual meaning. Within this frame of reference, the use value of sexuality is predominantly reproduction (ignoring here the developing surrogate parent market) and recreation. Women who do not fit this family-centered framework are thrust out of the normative definitions of sexuality: lesbians, nuns, spinsters, prostitutes, and women in the pornography industry. These groups are lumped together to highlight that their deviant status arises, not from their illegality, but because they are outside the protection of men by choice or by sociomoral denunciation.

The notion of recreational, nonreproductive sex (the use value of sex) is a relatively modern phenomenon, particularly for married women. This new model of sexuality has generated an avalanche of media images, novels, advice books, and self-help groups to create norms for the practice and enjoyment of women's sexuality. Much of this recreational sexual identity has been based upon historical and erroneous definitions supplied by men: the norm of the vaginal orgasm, definitions of the sexually attractive, and control of the verbal and nonverbal cues for sexual initiation. Even the use value of women's sexual behavior has been commercialized from the standpoint of men's definitions.

The second frame of reference for sexuality is in the economic activities of prostitution and pornography. Pornography is defined here as reflecting the Greek root for the term, "the graphic depiction of whores." As Dworkin (1970) asserts, feminists have made honorable attempts to distinguish erotica from pornography. However, in the male sexual lexicon, the distinction is in the marketing, not in the vocabulary of power. "In the male system, erotica is a subcategory of pornography" (Dworkin, 1970, ii). Since there is so much controversy as to what feminists define as pornography, our analysis looks specifically to the industry of pornography as opposed to the pornography product. These are sexual activities that take place primarily outside the family institution—and which have many characteristics of a market activity. Prostitution follows many of the supply and demand characteristics of the larger economy, but the product is the sexual activity of women. Pornography also follows these demand characteristics. In both instances, women are sexual objects, treated anonymously and without control over their own labor. The pornography and prostitution industries are controlled by males, whether as producers, pimps, or enforcers of the legal sanctions associated with this work. When these sexual activities take place outside the family, they are nonlegitimate from the standpoint of significant cultural norms, and much of the economic activity must then be carried out in illegal markets.

3. *Self-esteem*

The social psychological construct of self-concept identifies important aspects of how the society and individual interact. Every social being has a self-concept. The self-evaluation of that identity provides the comparative concept which Weber stated we must come to understand. Use value, in this instance, would include both the individual self-evaluation that leads to personal well-being (am I a good person?) and the social factors that influence the construction of that evaluation by which the self-concept becomes a resource or a liability in social settings.

Sandra Bem's classic work has already demonstrated that the social interpretation of gender creates an evaluative system for individuals, including "experts"

such as counselors and therapists (Bem, 1976). These evaluations also have consequences for behaviors, with those who adhere to the more traditional dichotomies of self-concepts into masculine and feminine clusters having fewer behavioral options.

It is important to note that, philosophically and socially, men and the institutions they control (mental health disciplines, media images, family, and church) dominated the discourse on "what is a woman?" This discourse poses a fundamental problem for women's self-esteem, because their self-evaluation is always drawn from a social context that is controlled by more powerful "others." In patriarchy, men possess the power to define the generalized other—the basic standards and norms of the collectivity from which we draw our evaluation of self (Ferguson, 1980).

In a market context, self-esteem becomes both a resource and a victim. Much of the human capital required for employment is predicated on some self-resource: achievement in school, ability to persevere in the face of failure, and the presentation of a confident, skilled self. As a resource, we can build self-esteem through a range of self-help courses and books, but most psychological literature indicates that females will have access to lower levels of this resource than men in general. Thus, we have the proliferation of consumer products targeted toward women to "assert ourselves gently," or to "dress for success."

However, the discourse of self-esteem and confidence is already set in those nonverbal skills that men demonstrate with more social approval than do women. The literature on nonverbal cues and speech patterns demonstrates that masculine behavioral traits are the medium of exchange in the market (Pearson, 1985).

Integrating the Model

A. Structure and process are both present in the struggle of women to establish individual value within the construct of the market value.

B. Feminist theorists identify one or more areas of power locus—Chafetz' formal model suggests the range of structures—institutions where value is defined. Such a theory provides a road map of where to look for women's definition of the situation (she emphasizes work, but includes family, religion, and education). Social definitions arise out of, and reinforce, economic and other structural phenomena (Chafetz, 1988, 138). In the examples above, definitions arise in the economic activities of women, not only in the labor market, but also in the household. Sexuality takes on meaning, not only in the family, but also in the market, especially when the mediating power of men is introduced. Self-esteem takes on its initial meanings in the family, school, and church—but then mediates social relations in other institutions.

C. The integrative model, with a focus on value, provides a framework for analyzing shifts. In patriarchy, the meaning of sexuality and self-esteem is refocused, depending on the location of family or economy within the definition. In a market economy, the value of sexuality and self-esteem is parallel to the economic exchange value in important dimensions. In each of these, the notion of use value as defined by women has been largely omitted from discussions of any major institutions.

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